

Every organization operates on a unique cultural core. Often, this culture involves hidden secrets that take time and luck to uncover.



It's likely there are secrets we forgot to include in this guide. Which brings us to...

Secret #1:

There are no stupid questions, only questions

In rapidly changing organizations we often suffer from a lack of clear documentation and clear expectations. While we aim to make our work and process explicit, it's good to ask extra questions and make clarifications whenever you're in doubt.

This may run counter to our past programming. In many educational or work environments, there exists judgement for not knowing things or asking "stupid" questions.

At Make School, we feel it's the organization's responsibility to make sure you know what you need to know to succeed. If you don't, your managers and peers are here to correct that.



We're aiming to design a culture that often runs counter to our past programming. We want to define progressive organizational principles that reflect what we feel organizations *should* look like in 50 years, not how they've been running for the past 50.

Of course, we don't always succeed. We make mistakes, operate in archaic ways, and make people feel like they aren't heard or don't have agency. All of us have different lived experiences, weaknesses, biases, and past work traumas that cause us to fail to uphold our principles.

And that's OK! Which brings us to...

Secret #2:

Assume negligence, not malice

It's important to keep in mind that we are all working toward the same goals. We all could choose to have jobs where we work less, earn more, carry less stress, or hold loftier titles. But we've chosen to be here because we care about our mission. We are all good people. We're kind and inclusive, we don't lead with ego, and we love collaborating with others.

But we are also human, so our actions don't always match our intent. In 95% of cases, when someone acts out of alignment with our principles or speaks in a harmful manner it's because they were negligent about their impact on others, not because they carry malicious intent.

Operating with this assumption helps us address conflict maturely, be forgiving of each others' mistakes, and help each other grow into our best selves.



Secret #3: Embody a growth mindset

We care deeply about leaving people - whether staff or students - better than when we found them. Essential to this is embodying a growth mindset towards yourself and towards others.

A growth mindset means we care more about where someone is going than where they are. We love giving feedback (*especially* constructive feedback) and consider this feedback as a sign of respect and an investment in someone's growth. It shows we care!

A growth mindset means we are forgiving towards ourselves and each other when we make mistakes. That mistakes (and feedback) are not reflections of who we are or what we are worth, rather a commentary on a specific action at a specific point of time. It means we believe in helping each other become better leaders and humans over the next few years.



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Let's start by defining what we want to avoid.

We don't like organizations led from a power-centric lens. We don't feel titles are a measure of worth or respect. We don't want pandering or politics. We don't think people should put the organization above their own needs. We don't want people to feel they are a cog in a machine, or are unable to implement improvements. We don't like micromanagement or rigid rules prescribing how we work. We don't wan't people distrusting each other.

It's sometimes easier to describe what we don't want than what we do want. That's because the culture we want will inherently change over time. What worked well for an organization of 8 people won't work well for an organization of 50 or 150. Certain underlying principles will remain, but you should expect that the secrets you're reading today may not hold true forever.

Change is an indicator that the organization is evolving.

Secret #4:

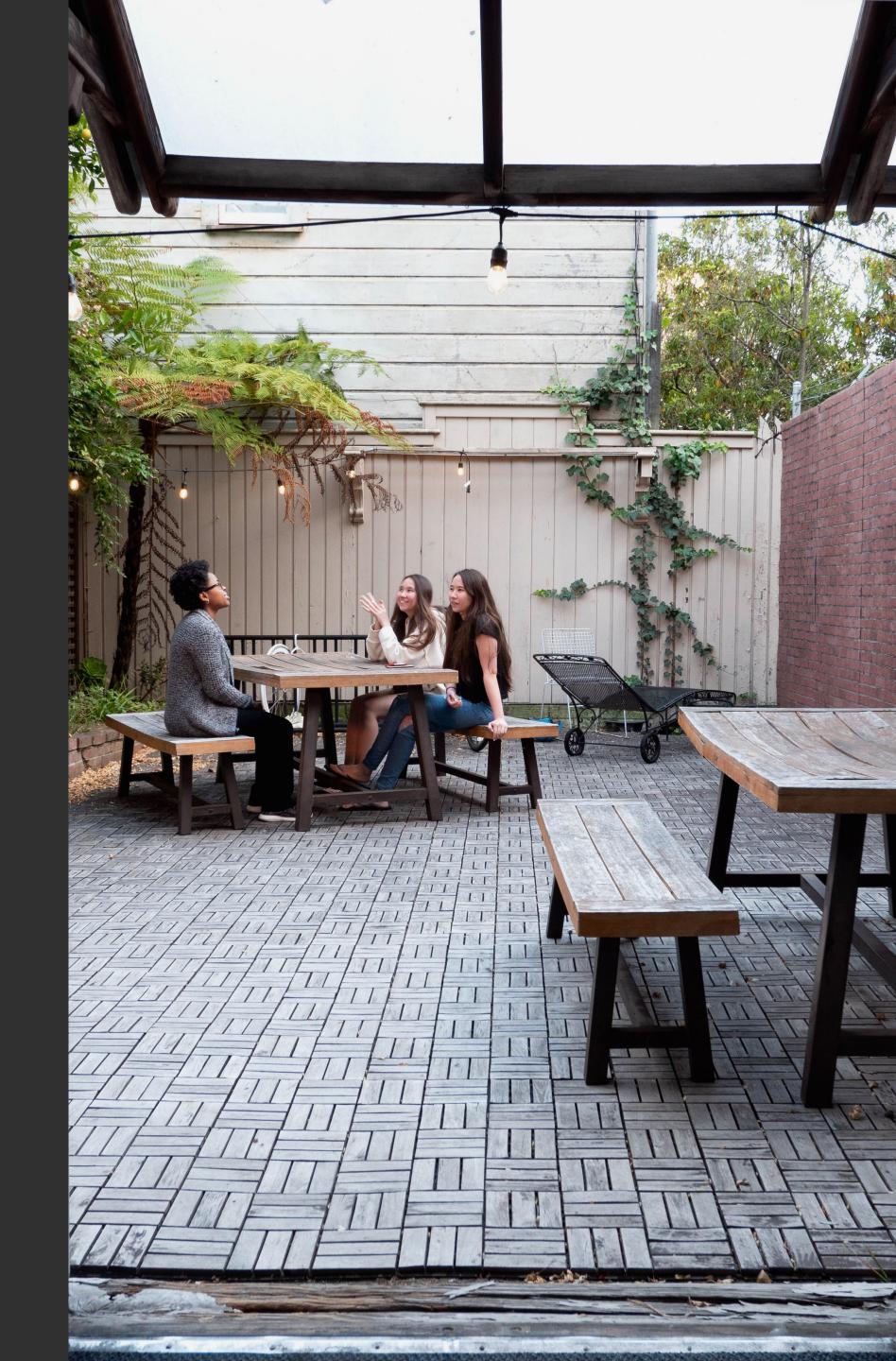
Create the change you want to see

One of the biggest challenges of joining a new organization is inheriting existing process or culture without full context on why it exists. In some cases, the process design was intentional, thoughtfully researched, and works well. In other cases, we implemented a fast solution to something years ago and haven't had bandwidth to improve it. Regardless of how long a process or principle has existed, it should be subject to change.

At a fast growing organization, our limiting constraints are time and focus. As a result, we drive change through a do-ocracy rather than consensus. If you have bandwidth to experiment with a change, demonstrate effectiveness, and gain buy-in from team members, then the change will stick. Often, individual contributors have *more* agency to drive change than managers or team leads (due to bandwidth constraints), though it takes hard work.

In certain cases, a process will impact many stakeholders or carry high cost/risk. If so, the change will require more thorough design and stakeholder buy-in. In these cases, managers or team leads will need to be more involved as they can represent the other stakeholders.

Culture and process can't be effectively defined in a top down mandates. It's created by individuals leading by example with consistency and regularity. If you have an idea for improvement but are not sure where to start, ask your manager or a peer for advice!



In addition to distributed agency, we aim to operate under a model of distributed ownership.

Secret #5:

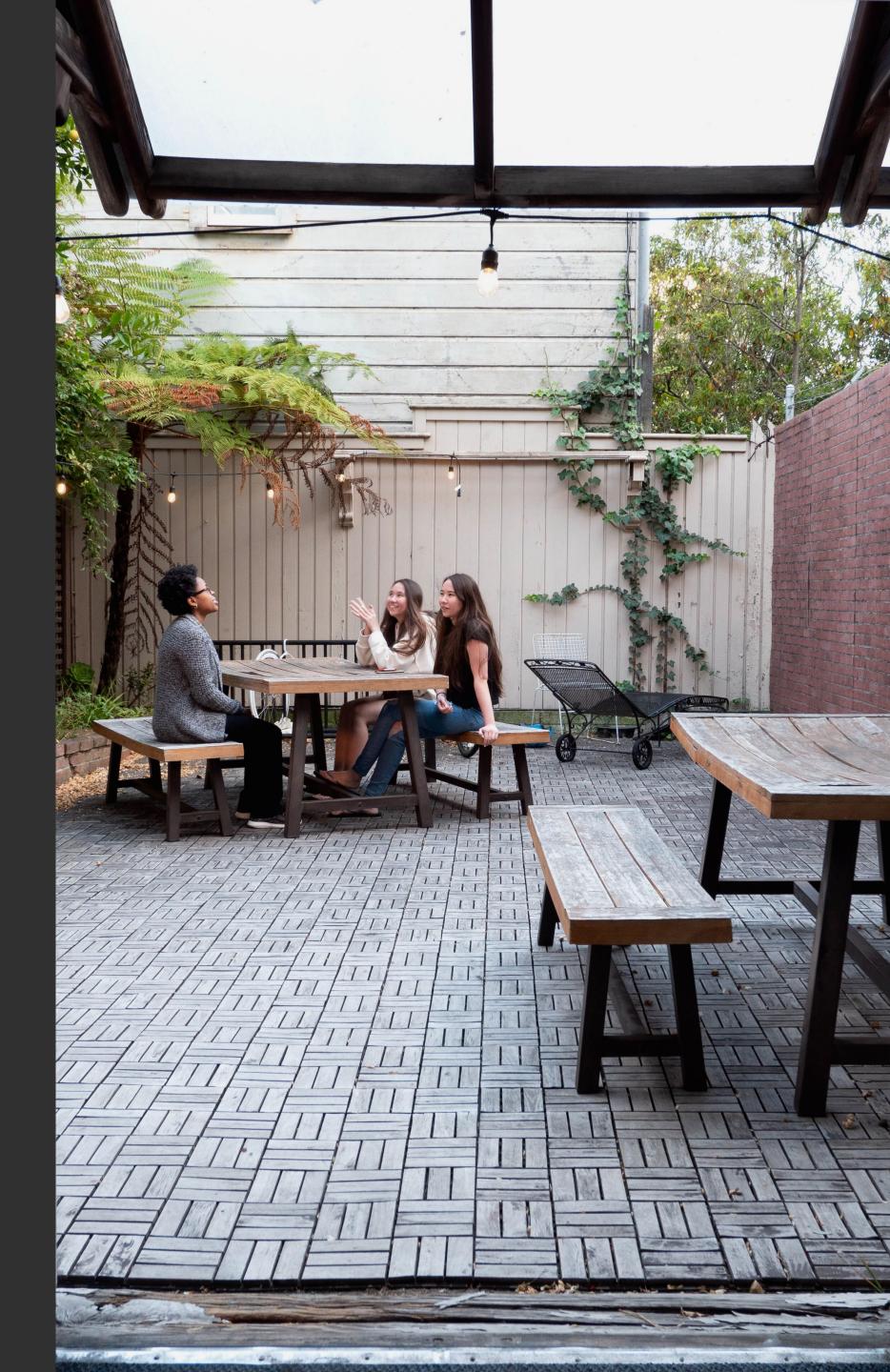
Trust yourself and others to own projects and make decisions

The most effective organizations have a high capacity to execute on complex problems, relative to their size. This can only be implemented through distributed ownership, where all team members - not just managers or project managers - can own and drive projects and decisions. This helps ensure no individual limits the organization's speed of execution due to managing too many simultaneous projects.

We sometimes hesitate to hand ownership over a project or a decision to someone we feel doesn't have prior experience with such a decision, mostly due to a fear of failure. In these instances, it's important to keep in mind that failure is almost never as harmful as we initially perceive. Failures also serve as critical learning experiences for more of us to build the capacity to effectively run key projects. A higher pace of innovation and higher speed of execution implies a higher rate of failure. We aim to design the organization to be resilient to failure and have checks and balances for high risk or high cost decisions.

We can mitigate risks of failure in a handful of ways. Communicating clear objectives, expectations, and decision frameworks upfront can help reduce time lost to false starts. Proactive and direct feedback from key stakeholders at the 20% and 80% marks - if not throughout the project - can help ensure certainty that project will meet expectations. We can also retain input without holding ownership through defining explicit roles as a veto-holder or key stakeholder and by sharing our ideas, constraints, and perspectives. This helps us operate under an assumption of trust that others are capable of executing on projects and decisions, while allowing us to verify this trust in non-blocking ways.

Our own confidence level can also prevent us from fully taking ownership over a project or decision. Keep in mind that you've been hired not just because we think you'll excel at your role, but also because we trust you to take ownership and initiative to build a better school. We want you to build capacity towards managing larger projects so our org has more capacity accomplish our ambitious goals. Remember to be resourceful when challenged by projects, especially by seeking support from peers inside or outside the org. Don't be afraid of failure, your manager is here to catch you if you fall.



In theory, an organization could distribute ownership even further and remove managers. So why do we choose to have managers?

Secret #6:

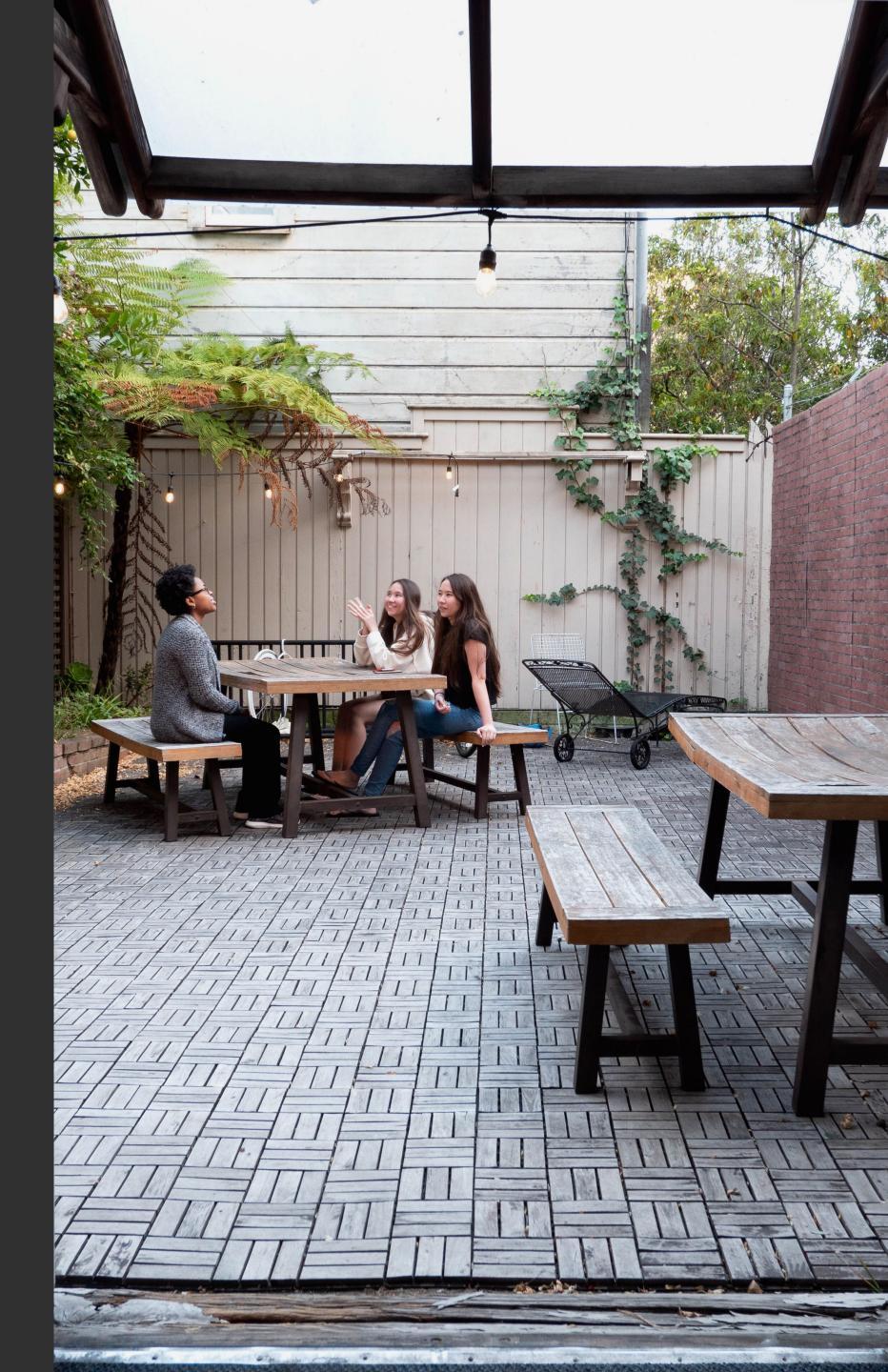
A manager's role is to hire, support, and coach

A manager's primary responsibility is to increase a team's capacity to execute on more complex and ambitious projects. Occasionally this is done by hiring new individuals to fill new needs. More often, this is done by supporting and coaching the existing team.

In order to build up an individual's capacity to execute successfully, a manager can give guidance and feedback, collect and synthesize information from other teams at the org, and create a felt sense of security that the org will be resilient to risk and failure.

Being a manager is a role with a specific set of responsibilities, just like any other role. It is not a synonym for power or command. At Make School, our board serves our executives, our executives serve our managers, our managers serve our individual contributors, and our individual contributors serve our students. We will recognize your success if you serve your stakeholders effectively and execute against your OKR's, rather than trying to make your manager happy.

In the context of a do-ocracy, individual contributors can also be leaders at the org, drive large projects, and build our organizational culture. Respect and influence are earned, not assumed based on a title (thus we try to stick to matter-of-fact rather than lofty titles).



We describe working at Make School like "building the spaceship as you're flying". This can feel both empowering and chaotic.

Prioritization of work and data-driven thinking are the keys to focusing effort and making thoughtful decisions.

Secret #7:

Use your OKRs as your north star

We each spend 40-60 hours per week working. We generally know that the work we are doing supports our mission, and that our mission correlates to our org wide metrics. But we often spend time working on things that don't significantly impact our core goals.

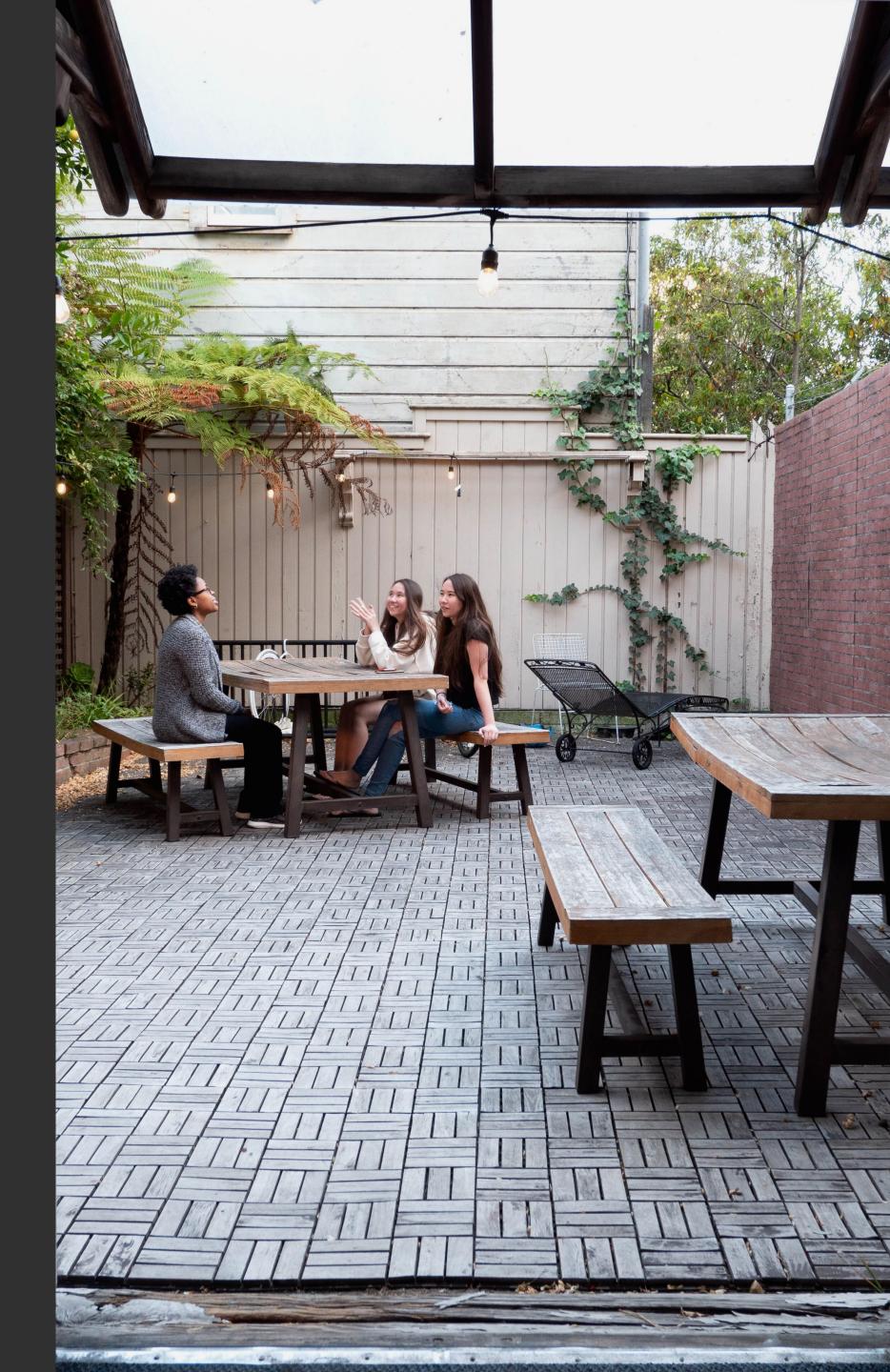
As we think about scaling Make School, it becomes increasingly important to reduce the time we spend on low impact activities and increase the time we spend on high impact ones. If we can increase our efficiency, we'll be able to make our workloads more sustainable while improving the quality of our program. It's important to note that increasing efficiency is not synonymous with spending less time with students. If spending time with students has high impact on learning outcomes and NPS, we should do more of it and reduce the time we spend elsewhere.

OKRs are similar to metrics, but they help ensure a clearer focus on metrics that matter. The Objective is a descriptor of what we are trying to achieve, while Key Results give us a way to benchmark whether we are making efficient progress towards the Objective. Our OKRs give us a window into how we are progressing against our mission and help us prioritize our work to achieve stronger results.

One of the core reasons we've found early success is we've consistently focused on student placement as an org wide Key Result. In just a few years, our average starting salary is on par with top CS degree programs. Holding this as an OKR has helped us define our strategy and prioritize our work.

If you're feeling stretched thin between too many projects and tasks, look to prioritize your workload based on what will have the largest and most direct impact on your OKRs. It's often better to work fewer hours on things that have more impact than work more hours trying to get everything done.

More on OKRs here: www.make.sc/okrs-101



Secret #8:

Drive decisions with research and data

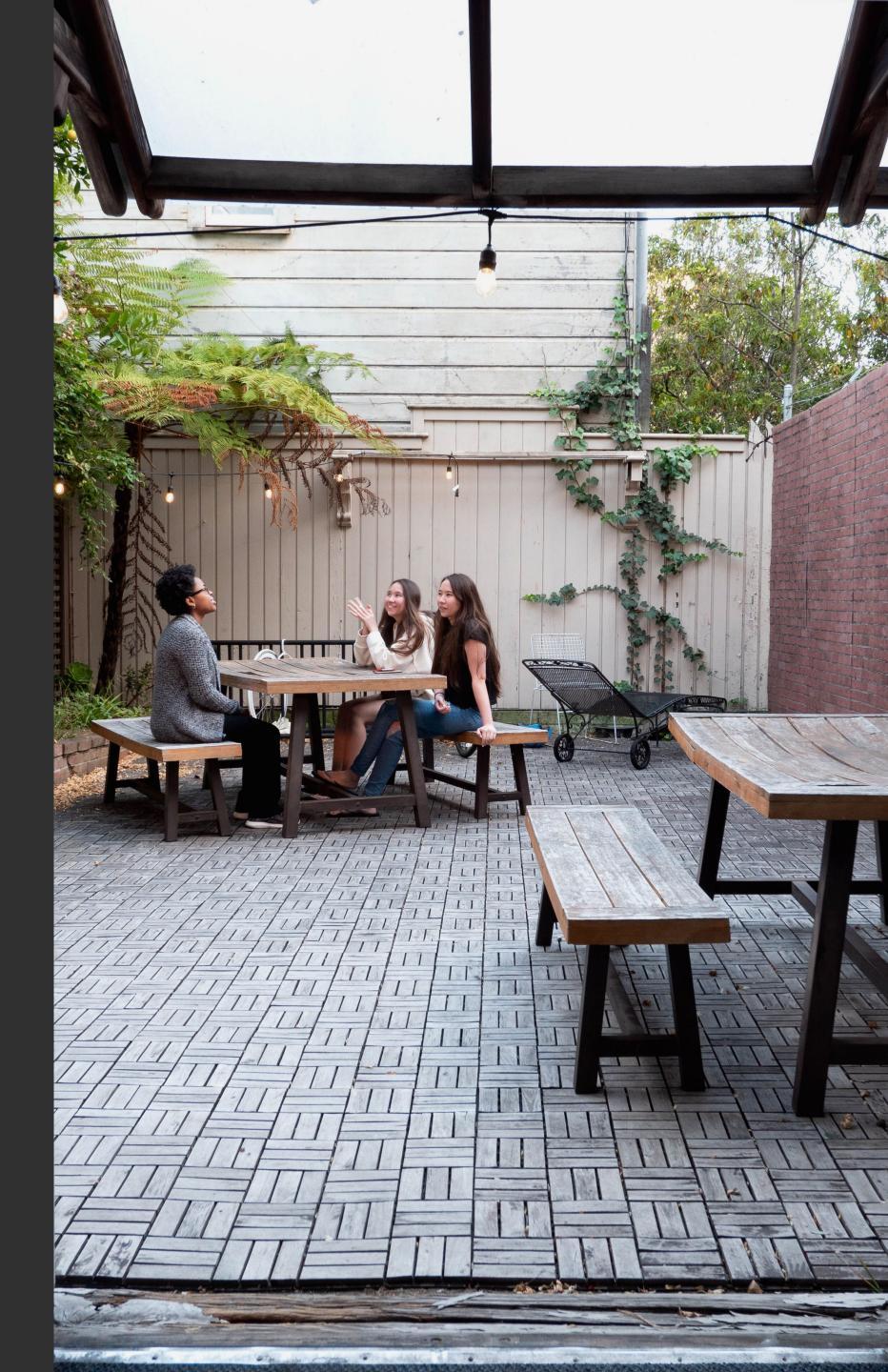
A thoughtful decision process mirrors that of a design process. We strive to use a thorough process for each decision, however acknowledge that compromises often need to be made to meet faster decision timelines.

First, we look to consult all stakeholders - talking to other teams impacted by the decision, interviewing students for user research, etc - to create a clear set of objectives and metrics that define the success criteria for the decision.

Next, we look to learn from past experiences of ours and others by collecting quantitative data that will help inform what type of decision we should make in the future. The data should try to create correlations between the decision factors (ie. what we have control over deciding) and the key results and metrics the decision will influence.

We can also collect qualitative perspectives and learnings from team members who have made similar decisions in the past, as well as from other organizations who have faced similar situations.

Finally, we can begin synthesizing these inputs into a recommendation, and socialize it with stakeholders to determine whether we need to collect more data or input to validate the decision. Oftentimes, data alone won't be enough to make the decision as not all data is complete enough or directly relevant enough. The research and data are tools to inform (and later defend) decisions, rather than make decisions for us.



One challenge with OKRs is that they can bring up competing priorities or keep you stretched thin. When in doubt, a simpler principle to follow is "Do what's best for the students".

Secret #9:

Be a steward of our Student First principle

Our success and failure as an organization is wholly dependent on whether we do right by our students.

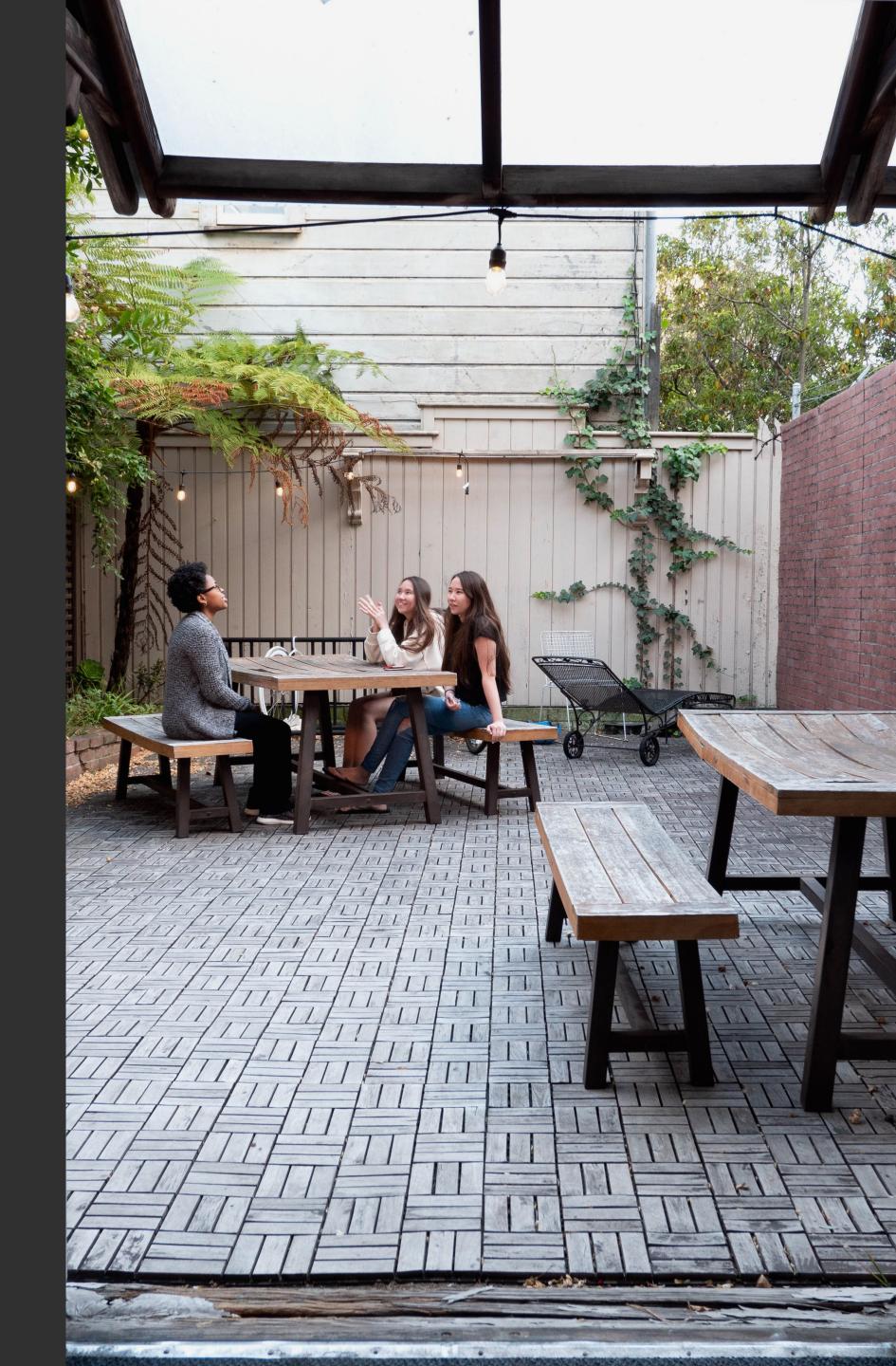
Unlike other impact driven businesses, we are not a double bottom line business. We are a single bottom line business. If our students succeed, we earn revenue. If they do not, we will face financial challenges. Our financial model cleverly creates a systemic incentive for us to optimize for student success, since revenue is directly generated from student success.

This means you are always doing right for the business by doing what's best for the students. Even in situations where it feels like doing right by students might incur greater costs, it is nearly always worth it in the long term to do so.

We should also strive to build a delightful and values driven experience for our student at each and every touchpoint in the student lifecycle, from marketing through ISA collections and alumni relations. Our reputation as an institution will drive our long term success and potential to become a large and influential organization. A great student experience is the primary driver of our brand and word of mouth growth.

Keep our Student First principle in mind every day, pro-actively challenge decision that don't seem best for our students, and design for the best student experience. In most cases, when we make decisions that aren't best for students it's because our perspective was incomplete, so it always helps to hear yours.

Most critically, culture isn't what's stated as a principle, it's defined by the actions and decisions we take and make every day. Many institutions also claim a Student First principle, but few truly embody it. It's our collective responsibility to uphold this to the fullest extent.



One of the keys to our success with students is we aim to treat them not just as students interfacing with a system, but as whole people interfacing with a community. Each student has various needs, desires, and flaws.

Similarly, we want to treat our team members as humans and cocreate a delightful work experience.

Secret #10:

Treat your team members as humans

We are all multi-dimensional and complex people. Our work and relationship with Make School is just one component of our whole self (though given the number of hours we put towards it, it is a significant component). In order to excel at work, we must also create conditions for emotional stability and fulfillment in our broader lives. Our interactions, expectations, and policies should recognize and support this.

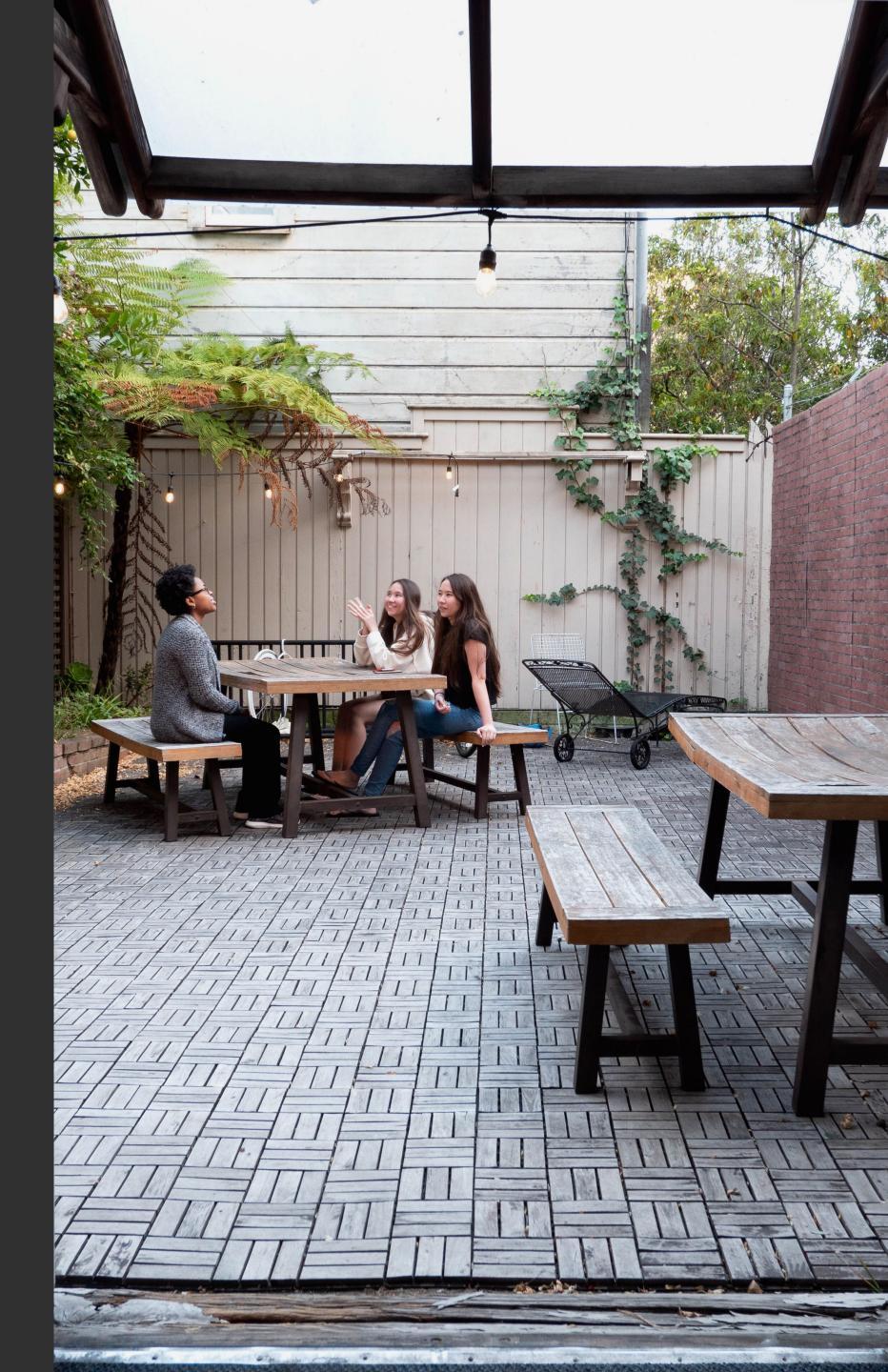
When interacting with peers - either through individual relationships or when defining policy - we recognize that we are humans first, team members second, and workers fulfilling a specific role third. We aim to treat each other with kindness as we would our friends, be transparent with our motivations and concerns as we would with our family, and support each other as teammates even if we don't work together directly.

We allow ourselves to take offline vacations, work remotely to visit loved ones, work from home to create space for deep work, and take mental health days if we're feeling overburdened by stress. We are trusting that our team members are working hard and working in manners most appropriate for them, while holding each other accountable if actual work output is not meeting expectations. We are glad when our peers are happy and have a lighter than usual workload, even if we are simultaneously experiencing heavy stress at work. We ask for support when we need it.

We aim to use language and define policy that feels organic and approachable, rather than overly formal, bureaucratic, or complex. We might still need to establish a strict and detailed set of rules for a policy, but such a policy can be supported by a layman's explanation helping to communicate the underlying principles (aka the "why") and core requirements. We understand that policy was created by someone just like us, and often created quickly to address a specific problem. We look to propose changes to policies if it they no longer feel reasonable or approachable.

We aim to be forgiving of each other if we make mistakes, hold unreasonable expectations, fail to communicate appropriately, or violate policy. It's human to make mistakes, and the intent of culture and policy is to drive behavioral trends rather than create perfect obedience. We try to think through recovery mechanisms for when we do make mistakes or fall out of line with an expectation.

Simply put, we do our best to be kind to each other. We are all here for the same reasons and - though it may not always feel this way in the moment - we're all on the same team.



It's important to remember that we all come from different backgrounds. Our race, gender, age, prior roles, and lived experiences give us different perspectives.

At Make School, we celebrate that!

Secret #11:

Create an inclusive environment

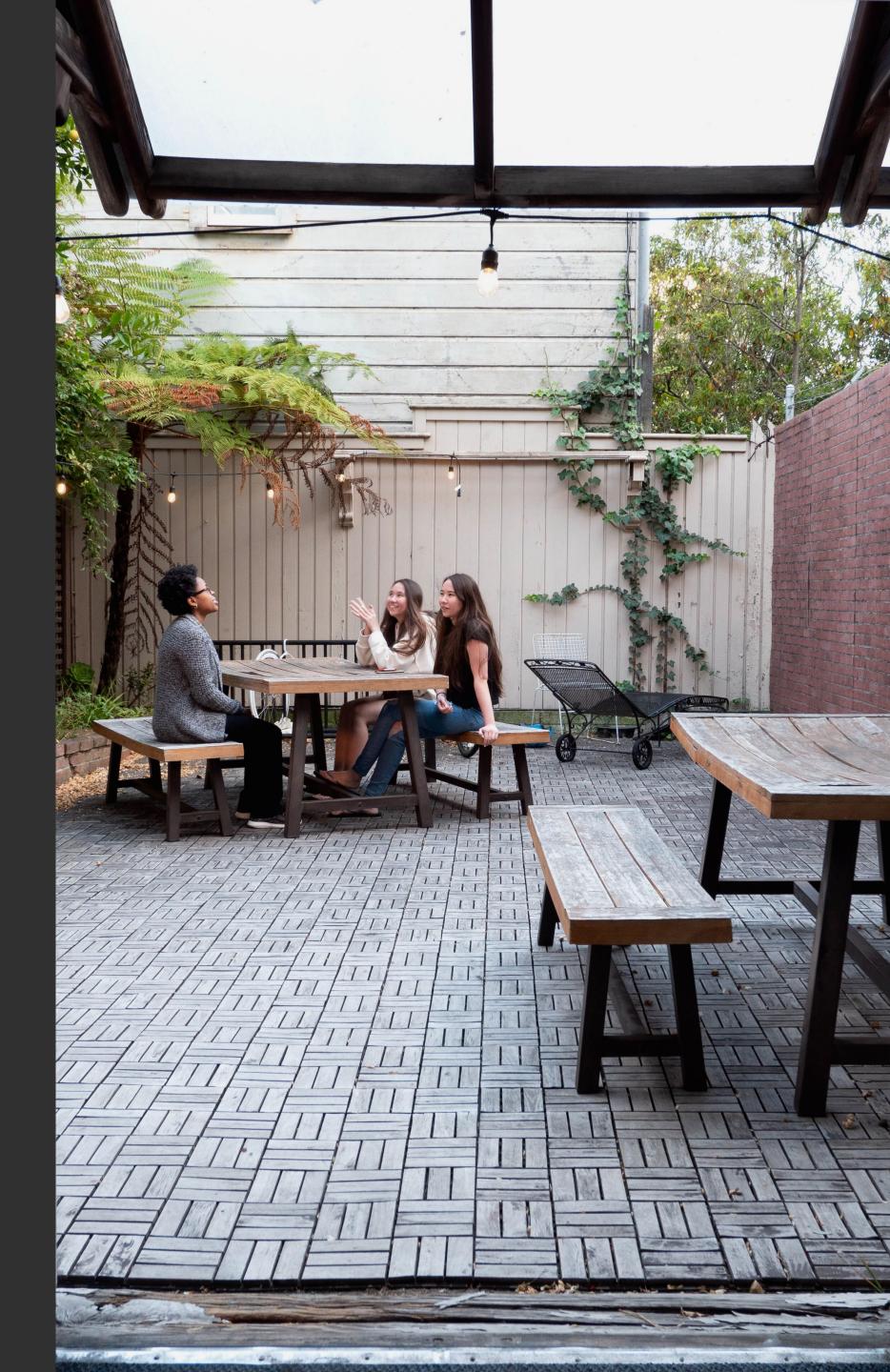
We all are different in our psychology, our working styles, our social preferences. Some of us are typically optimistic, while others typically focus on mitigating risk. Some of us are typically confident, while others are typically self critical. Some of us draw more energy from social interactions and meetings, while others draw more energy from solo creation time. Some of us typically tie our emotional well-being to how our work is going, while others tie it to our loved ones or hobbies.

In reality, we all fluctuate on a spectrum of these characteristics dependent on the our life context as well as the specific context of the situation.

Creating an inclusive environment means learning to accept, acknowledge, and collaborate with others who take different approaches or hold different perspectives than our own. We aim to avoid assuming that our approach is the singular right approach for everyone. We don't hold onto societal generalizations that posit that engineers are introverted and shy or that managers are confident and extroverted, et cetera. We do our best to avoid judgement or criticize other for being one way or another - especially when the characteristics are linked to harmful stereotypes around race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, age, socioeconomic status, culture, political conviction, religion, neuro(a)typicality, appearance, or disability.

Instead we allow each other to approach our roles with our own brand of unique characteristics that still allow us to execute effectively and meet the expectations of our role. We recognize that certain shortcomings are related to our lived experiences and support each other in mitigating impact of those shortcomings. We also recognize that many shortcomings are corollary to an inverse strength, and help each other best use our strengths to achieve success.

Our code of conduct: www.make.sc/code-of-conduct



Diverse teams create stronger outcomes by including more perspectives and making better decisions. Diverse perspectives can also create challenges in communication, collaboration, and consensus.

We can mitigate these challenges with mindful teamwork.

Secret #12:

Being a great team player is more important than individual performance

We've observed that the most successful team members at Make School (and the one who go on to progress furthest in their careers after Make School) are the ones who focus on supporting team goals rather than their individual goals and accomplishments.

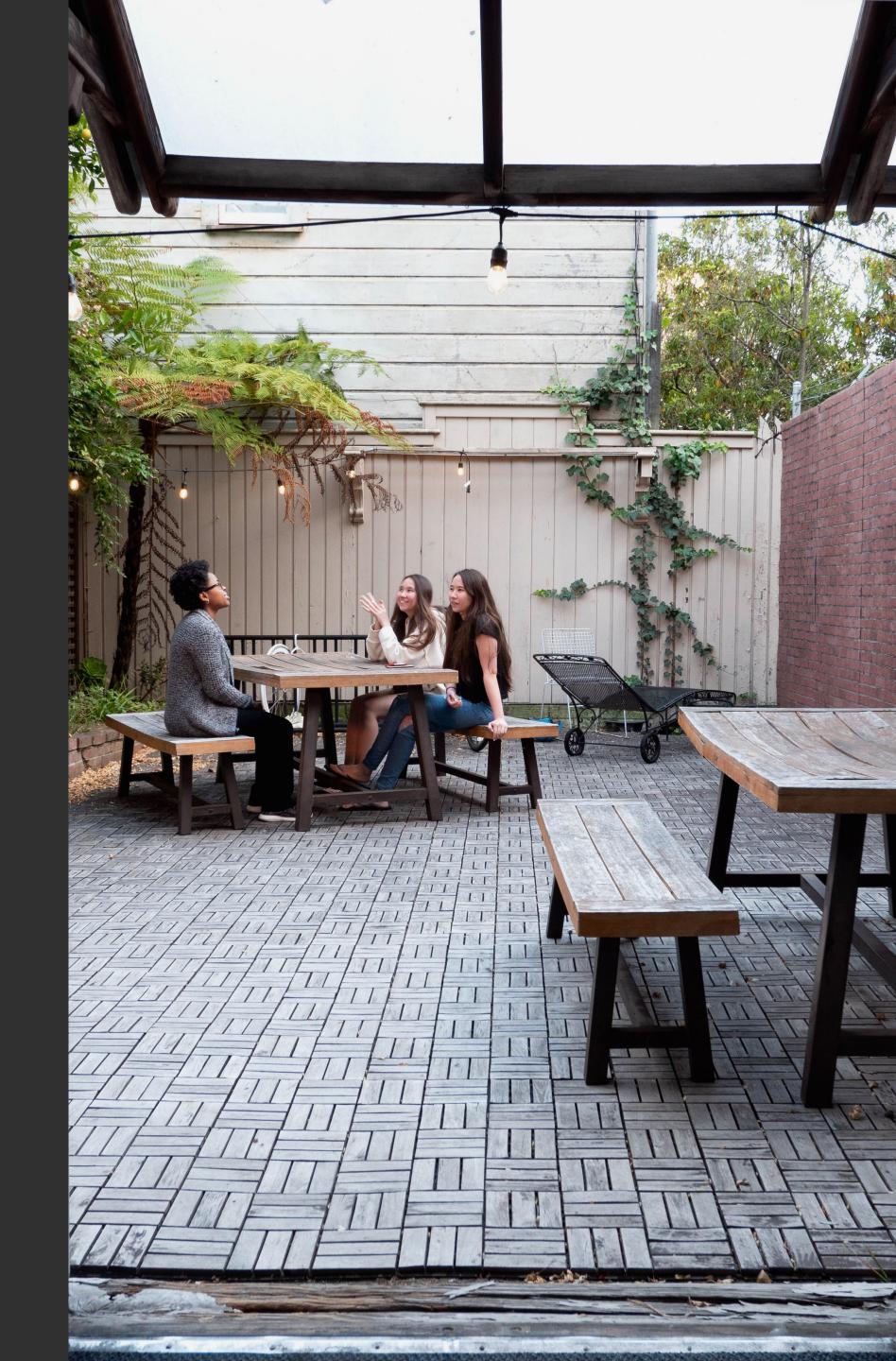
This is due to the fact that all work is collaborative. Knowing how to work well with others will drive objective results (which you can talk about in future interviews) and inspire your peers to give you more trust and responsibility. The social capital you build at Make School will also support you in your career growth far more than a title or promotion, it will provide you strong referrals to your next company and strong references to ensure you get the next job. Similarly, it will be recognized at Make School.

Being a great team player is about operating in a way that builds trust of your colleagues, through honesty, transparency, pro-active communication, and effective execution. It helps to create positive externalities for the team, executing on projects not just in the way you feel is best, but in the way that makes it easier for others to do their jobs.

We look to pro-actively supporting our peers in their work, providing pro-active feedback and advice to support their growth. We try to call in (gently drawing attention to) rather than call out behaviors that could use improvement.

In times of conflict or challenge we assume good intentions of others and use collaborative rather than combative language. We avoid gossip, politics, and secretive or repetitive complaints. We de-escalate situations using empathy, self awareness, and nuance.

We can individually only be as successful as our team. We can only achieve our ambitious dreams if our team is an effective team. And if we collectively master the art of working well together (rather than focusing on being rockstars in our own domains), we will find much more joy in our work.



Secret #13:

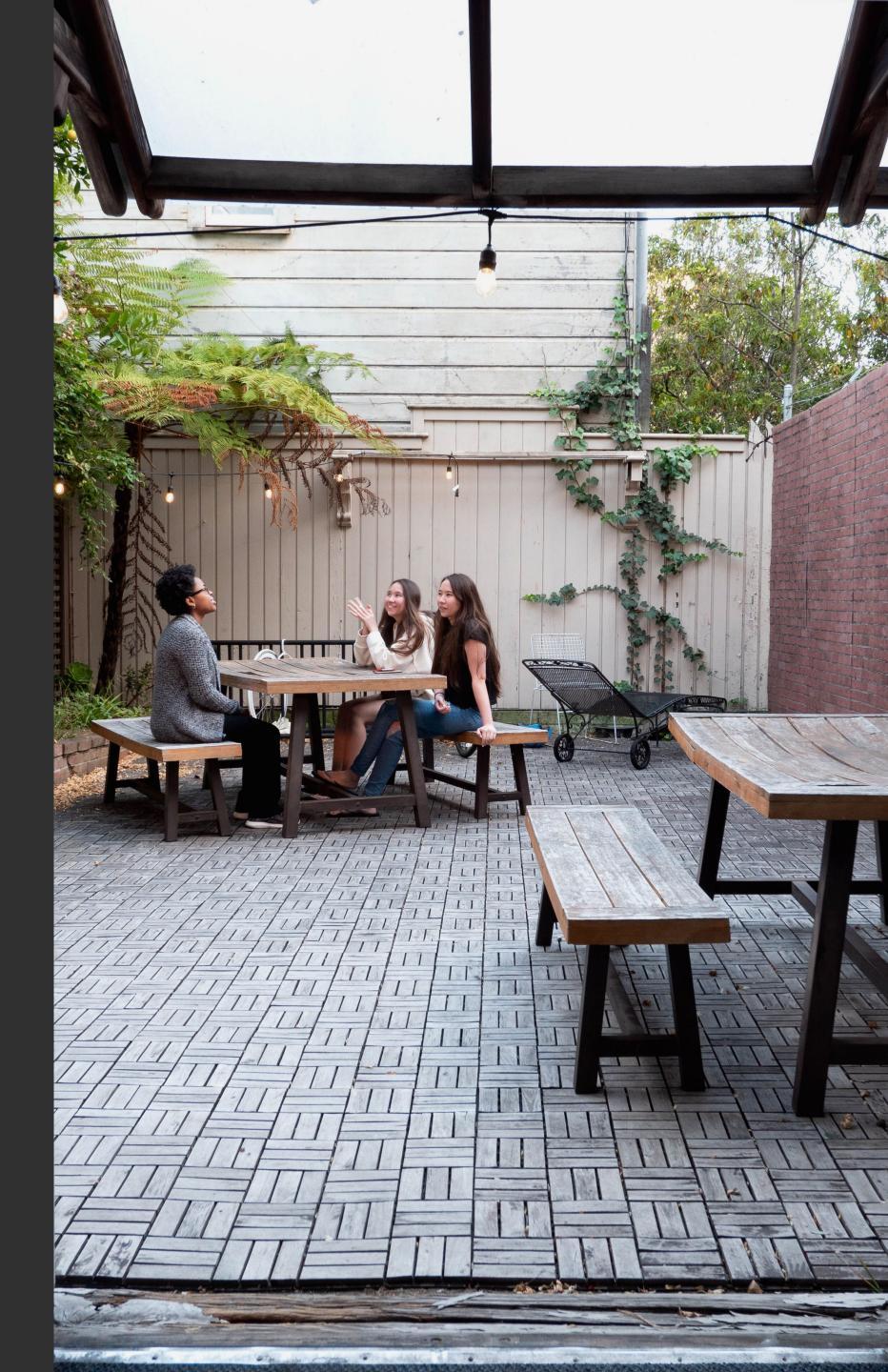
Learn to disagree and commit

Oftentimes the biggest challenge to being a great team player is when you feel certain a decision the team is headed toward is incorrect. It feels we're making a big mistake and it's going to cost the organization significantly.

These scenarios are bound to happen with a diverse organization of highly intelligent people. We often approach decisions with different perspectives, principles, and priorities. Language and culture is imprecise, and data is often lacking. Two incredibly bright people can walk away with radically different interpretations of what to do.

In these scenarios, we aim to disagree and commit. In practice, this means we will air our perspective and concerns - which might mean fighting for the decision we believe in - prior to the decision being made. But once the decision has been made by the owner, we fully commit to promoting the decision internally (rather than criticizing it) and execute on it with as much conviction as we would a decision of our own. The only thing worse than making the wrong decision, is executing the wrong decision in a half-assed manner. This takes a huge amount of emotional maturity, but is necessary for us to make the best of the path we've chosen.

We often prefer decisions that commit to an idealistic perspective or solution rather than a compromise solution intended to appeal to everyone. Oftentimes, consensus is the death of excellence - design decisions are a great example due to their subjectivity. Our ownership model trusts the decision maker to do what they feel is right after taking input from all stakeholders.



In order to collaborate effectively, we rely on strong project management with stakeholder input and diligent delegation.

Secret #14:

Invest in managing projects effectively and over-communicate

Effective project management is far more important than having the right vision or ideas. It's the difference between executing to a plan vs running behind schedules or over costs. It's the difference between being able to execute well with many team members rather than executing well on a solo project.

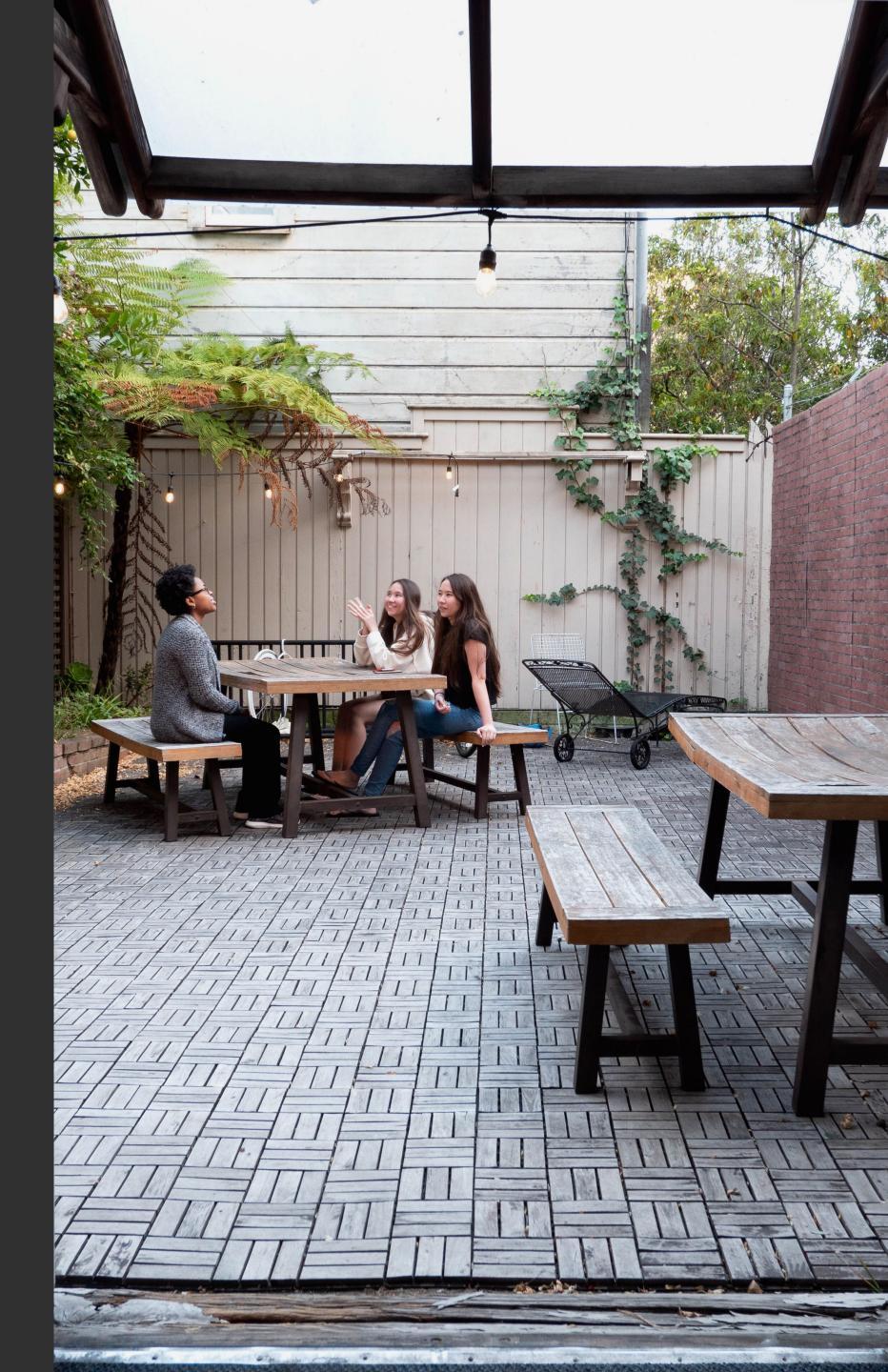
Effective project management starts with understanding the goals and objectives of a project through stakeholder input. It requires a clear project roadmap built into Asana complete with descriptive tasks, realistic deadlines, and delegation to peers (being sensitive to their bandwidth constraints). It involves asynchronous information delivery and efficient meetings focused discussion rather than information sharing. It involves being pro-active about identifying and communicating challenges that threaten to derail the project, and being creative and resourceful to solve them.

Most importantly, effective project management involves over-communicating to stakeholders on the right channels. Stakeholders should always understand the status of the project, what's expected of them by when, why decisions are being made, and be given opportunity to give input on decisions. These communications should largely happen async (via email, slack, and asana), with regular meetings to allow for discussion on larger projects or decisions.

It's best to assume that people have competing priorities and thus aren't as attentive to your project as you might like. Reminders are always helpful (not viewed as pestering) to help people stay on track.

Our ability to execute on an ambitious vision is directly driven by our team's ability to complete large and small scale projects efficiently and predictably. We aim to set a good example for each other as well as our students by running projects effectively and over-communicating.

More on project management: <u>www.make.sc/pm-101</u>



As we grow our organization we constantly need to adapt our workflows to accommodate more students and more team members. When designing processes to complete projects, it's equally important to think about next year's needs as today's needs.

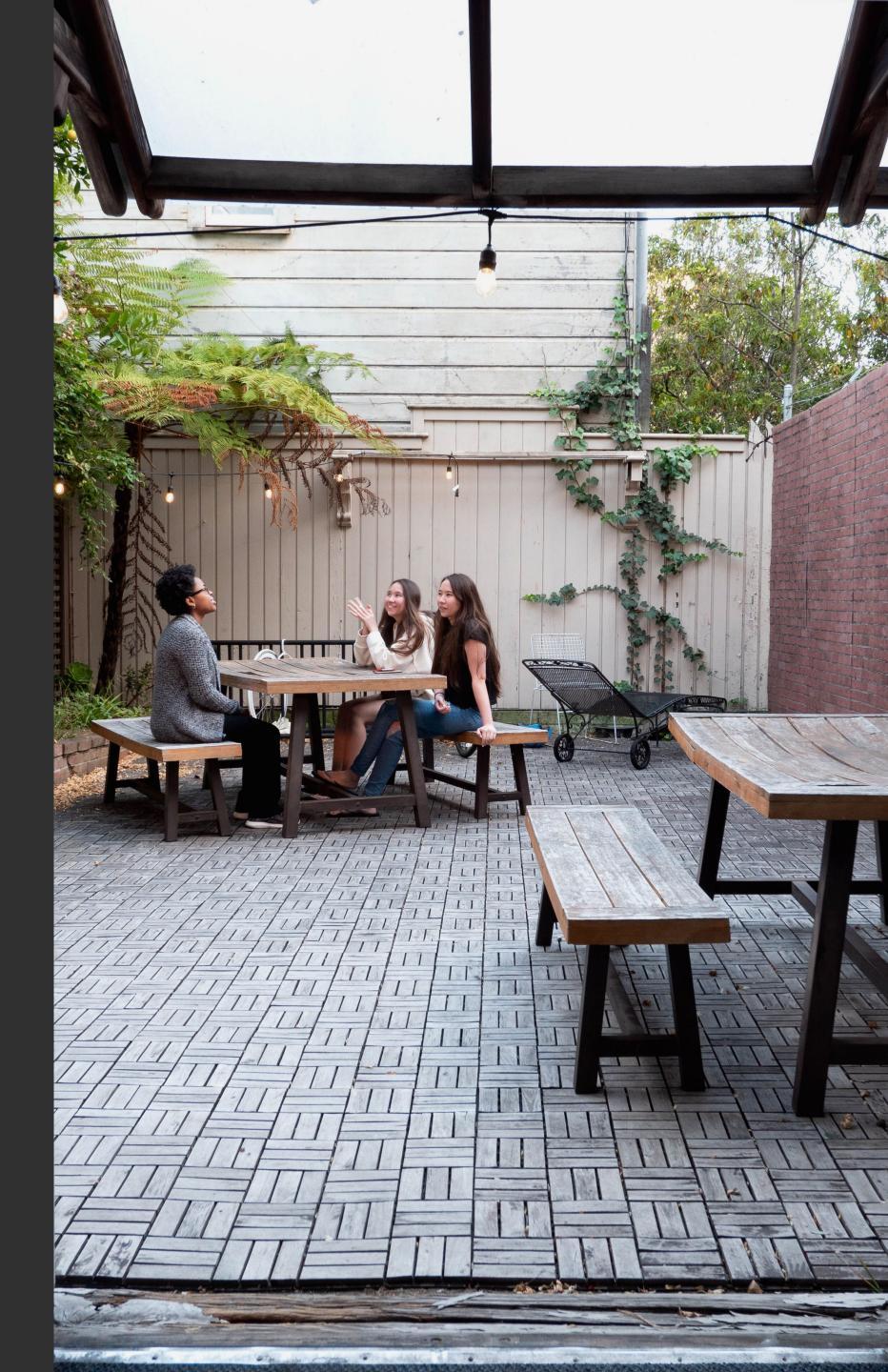
Secret #15: Design systems for scale

As a growing organization, it's important to keep in mind that success tomorrow is as important as success today. It's not just important to execute effectively on today's goal, but also important to build a foundation of thoughtful process to help us scale.

This means building better data systems, designing more efficient workflows, creating clear documentation, and templates of projects that create repeatable process. We should avoid repeating the same work, either by automating it or creating shortcuts or templates. We aim to build process in a way that allows new hires to execute on an initiative without speaking to the process designer. We try to understand what our needs will be in 1-2 years with 2-4x the number of students, and start building toward a system that will support it.

Of course, this ideal is often hard to live up to, especially when moving quickly. We don't want to build a perfect system that's too slow to setup and too complex for our current size. Understanding the balance is a judgement call that's only learned through experience and input of others.

We also aim to build systems that help strengthen our principles and culture. Our tuition model is an example of a systemic drive to strengthen our Student First principle, while our professional development is an example of a system that strengthens our culture. It's helpful to reflect on other second order initiatives we could implement to ensure our org grows and makes good decisions.



We hope these secrets serve you well in navigating your work at Make School. We are always on your team and want you to succeed. But we're sometimes guilty of under-communicating. Setting expectations can be hard when we're trying to accomplish a lot.

Which brings us to our final secret...

Secret #16:

Ask for feedback and clarify expectations

While we are aiming to do our best to help you succeed in your role at Make School, it's also critical to take agency over your own success. You are directing the movie you are living in and you are the one watching most closely to notice issues.

If you clarify expectations, pro-actively ask for feedback, and deliver based on it - you are guaranteed to succeed here. The most successful team members ask for peer and manager feedback at 20% and 80% marks of every project they work on, and ask for manager feedback on what they can do better at least monthly. The best way to meet expectations is to document what they are and think about them regularly.

This is especially important at times that your manager and peers are undercommunicating or don't seem in touch with your feelings or expectations. A quick conversation to get on the same page or a coffee chat outside the office can go a long way to alleviate any misunderstandings and avoid missed expectations. Oftentimes even the most empathetic managers or peers aren't able to see into your head or fail to communicate what's going on in theirs.

Everyone here is on the same team. Even if we don't always interface in the best manner, we truly want you to succeed and will definitely help when you ask for it.



Our culture isn't defined by what's written in this deck.

It's defined by the actions and decisions you take and make every single day.

With your help, we can build a progressive organizational culture that enables us to consistently thrive and improve. If we succeed, we'll ensure Make School remains a great place to learn and work for decades (or centuries) to come!

Thanks for reading, we hope you enjoy the flight:)

